

# STONE WALLS

Spring 1991



**The Western Railroad**  
*150th Anniversary • 1841-1991*

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# Why Celebrate The Anniversary Of The Railroad?

All too often when we celebrate an historical event, it is a celebration only of the past, not the present. But the Western Railroad still lives, although its name has changed a number of times. Like an old house, it not only has a past but a present, and hopefully, a lively and busy future. Major George W. Whistler, the chief engineer who built the railroad 150 years ago through an area which people said was impossible, would easily recognize the route today. However, he certainly would be amazed at the modern trains and powerful diesel locomotives which now travel his railroad line.

The building of the railroad brought many changes to the hilltowns. Some towns such as Russell and Chester grew in population and industry, though their hill farms declined. Boston and Albany and the West were only a few hours away. Now we were connected with the rest of the world, although it was just

as difficult as ever to get from Chester to Worthington. Some of the Irish workers who built the railroad stayed on and became part of their new communities. Products made locally could be shipped out by rail and other items brought in for local use. The isolated self-sufficient farm and village disappeared as people became part of a larger, ever-changing world. Life would never be the same.

Now the railroad is part of our history. The helper steam engines and the small town stations are gone. The two passenger trains which still travel the line no longer stop between Pittsfield and Springfield. The old time railroad men are mostly gone. Yet the continuity of those rails endures as they cross and recross the Westfield River while climbing the steep grades between Westfield and Washington. The magic and challenge remain. What will be their story in 2041?

A celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Western Railroad will be held in Chester at the Railroad Station on Saturday, June 15, 1991.

## STONE WALLS

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# The Western Railway....

## The B&A Railroad

From: *History of Washington, MA* by John Wright Crane

*John W. Crane was born in Washington, MA, in 1847. He became a conductor on the railroad when he was seventeen years old. Later he moved to Springfield but continued to maintain close ties with his home town. In 1976 when the Eagle Printing and Binding Co. in Pittsfield were cleaning out their old printing room, they discovered a "History of Washington" that John Crane had written in 1918 and left there "for reasons forgotten." It had never been printed but became the basis for Washington, Massachusetts, 1777-1977 Our 200th Year.*

Scarcely a decade had passed after the building of the 'Pontoosic Turnpike' before it began to be rumored that a railroad was being considered to run through this valley from Boston to Greenbush opposite the city of Albany. This road would cross and recross the turnpike over which the stage coach was now luxuriously carrying its passengers.

This first suggestion of a railroad through Berkshire County to Albany is believed to have been made by Dr. Abner Phelps, a native of Belchertown and a graduate of Williams College in 1806. His idea was to construct a horse railroad such as was then in use in Wales. This had wooden rails with an iron strap on them. Then the project of building a canal from Boston to connect with the Erie at Albany was agitated, and in 1825 a committee was appointed by the legislature to examine into its feasibility. The committee reported favorably upon it, but it got no further. From that time on the construction of a railroad was increasingly agitated.

The first surveys made in Massachusetts for testing the practicability of introducing railroads were completed in 1827, and continued through the following year. It is interesting not to say amusing to examine the reports of the engineers and committees under whose management these early surveys were made, and to compare the extremely modest expectations and desires of the people then, with the astonishing realities of the present day. Ten miles an hour was the utmost that could be expected for "coaches" and "a change of horses" would be required every sixteen miles at that!

Nothing was done, however, with these surveys towards the building of the roads until the year 1830. Several charters were granted, in June 1830 by the Massachusetts legislature for forming companies; but with the exception of that for the Boston and Lowell Railroad, they all proved abortive.

In June 1831 a charter was granted for the establishment of the Boston and Worcester Railroad, and during the following spring, 1832 the stock was taken up, and the organization of the corporation completed. On the 3rd of July 1835, the first locomotive ran over the whole road to Worcester. On the 6th the opening was celebrated by a great entertainment.

On March 16, 1833, while the Boston and Worcester railroad was under construction, the Directors of that road were incorporated as the Western Railroad Co. — to build a road from Worcester to the west line of the state, in the town of West Stockbridge. Two or three years elapsed however, before the stock was fully subscribed, — and the company organized, — so hard was it to gain the confidence of the investing public. The road to Springfield was opened, October 1, 1839. During the summer of 1838, the portion of the railroad from Springfield to West Stockbridge was put under contract for grading.

Previous to this, however, the question of the route to be taken became a burning issue. There was a Northern and a Southern Route proposed, both backed by strong advocates. Finally the decision was made in favor of the northern route, — the present line, through Pittsfield, largely through the efforts of Mr.

Leonard Pomeroy of that town.

The news of the proposed railroad caused a great commotion in the quiet hamlet of Washington for the sturdy farmers feared that with the advent of the railroad the sale and use of horses would be practically stopped and all agricultural pursuits would be greatly injured. When the surveyors came to map out the proposed route the hostility of the farmers became more pronounced. They were unwilling to sell the right of way through their farms and an official notice had to be served on the owner of one of the largest farms before the surveyors could proceed with their work.

It is related that one of the farmers, Abraham Deming, by name, indignant at having his land used came out one day, pitchfork in hand, to a party of surveyors at work in his meadow. One of them rather sarcastically asked him how far he owned. Mr. Deming replied with great dignity and force, "As high as heaven and as deep as hell." This became a saying through all the coming years.

Between Westfield and Pittsfield the old Western railroad followed substantially the old Indian trail, — 'Unkamit's Path.' Early surveyors and government messengers made great use of it, — and tradition asserts that one or more adventurers and spirited women traversed it. The faithful old guide, from whom it took its name, lived in Pittsfield. The trail began in Washington to follow the mountain stream which flows through the meadow below the 'summit,' increasing in size and volume before it reaches the Westfield meadows.

The road was three years in building. It was a gigantic undertaking in those days, for in the town of Washington it meant the cutting down of the highest mountain in the survey and the filling up of deep valleys and the filling up of the "bottomless" Muddy Pond, ere the railroad could be completed.

The story runs that before the contractors came upon the scene, in the summer following the survey, there might have been seen a solitary Irishman with pick, shovel and wheel barrow, breaking the ground on the hillside at Washington summit, where he worked alone

and unaided for three weeks. But in June 1838 the work was commenced and vigorously carried on. Daniel Carmichael & Co. had the contract for the rock cutting in Washington and they had Sidney Dillon, — afterwards one of the 'railroad kings' — as their foreman over the work.

The cut at Washington summit — known as the "gateway into the Berkshires" — is the highest point on the railroad; it is 1457 feet above the sea level and 1000 feet higher than Albany and 1385 feet above Springfield.

In order to facilitate the work of cutting through the ledge it was found necessary to divide the workmen into three gangs, one being at work in the center and the other two at the north and south ends respectively. The drills used largely in those days were called 'churn drills' and were operated by horse power. The work of blasting was attended by many dangers and some curious and fatal accidents occurred. To escape the showers of stone from the blasts it was necessary for the men to run some distance. An Irishman was observed to take shelter under a shelving rock close by. Tho the foreman warned him again and again of the dangerous refuge he had chosen he continued to take shelter there and his comrades half envied his seeming security. One day, however, after an unusually heavy blast, Jimmy was missing when work was resumed. Upon going to investigate his fellow workmen found that a stone, as well fitted as by measure, had been driven up under the overhanging rocks and poor Jimmy was entombed. After considerable labor the stone was removed and the crushed and lifeless form was taken out.

Occasionally a large rock would be thrown quite a distance. The largest one which did any damage was thrown over a quarter of a mile, landing upon the floor of the house now owned by Conrad Fisher, then used as a store. A woman who was doing her week's washing on the second floor of the house had just left the wash tub when the stone fell through the roof and crashed down through the tub and the floor into the cellar. The piece of rock weighed about half a ton.



The most formidable rock cutting upon the Western Railroad was made at the summit, being over half a mile in length and 55 feet in its greatest depth; over 100,000 cubic years were removed in its excavation. There is likewise a heavy embankment just before reaching the "cut." The grade of the road is 20 feet to the mile from Russell to Huntington, 36 feet from Huntington to Chester, 55 from Chester to Middlefield, and 79-82 feet from Middlefield to Becket and 78 feet from Becket to Washington. It is level from Washington to Hinsdale and is 73 feet from Hinsdale to Dalton. From Washington to Hinsdale, a distance of nearly five miles, the road passes over a high table land which divides the waters of the Connecticut from those flowing to the west into the Housatonic. The course is directly north. From this elevation the view is extensive and imposing. The blue summits of the Catskill Mountains can be seen in clear weather.

In filling the embankment for the road bed through the Crane and Deming meadow the steep hill which formerly divided the two villages was excavated and the highway now runs through it. This gravel was carried to the embankment from the hill in dump cars which ran over a wooden track. The grade was so steep that no engines were required. The empty cars were drawn back by horses to the gravel bank where they were filled by the steam shovel which had then just come into use. The ruins of this road bed to the gravel hills as it runs through the meadow to the railroad bank are still plainly visible. The house of Joel Crane, which was built upon the top of the hill, was destroyed in the removal of the gravel. The ruins of the well which supplied the house still remain. This well was 142 feet deep. For a number of years the top of this well was covered with a flat stone but when the farm came into the possession of John M. Crane, in 1857, it was filled with stone.

The Westfield river rises in Washington and flows under the railroad for the first time in this high embankment and continues, in culverts and bridges, to pass under the railroad, twenty-seven times before reaching Westfield

— a distance of 28 miles.

The building of these culverts and bridges was done by the Birnie Brothers of Springfield, — their names being William P. and Alexander Birnie.

The survey of the railroad through Muddy Pond revealed a depth of 39 feet. The rock which was taken out of the summit ledge was used as a foundation for the railroad bed through the pond as well as for the embankment through the meadow, below the summit. While engaged in this work a train of gravel cars was left over night on this new road bed. Great was the amazement of the workmen to find on their return to work in the morning that the cars and even the track had disappeared during the night and that the place was covered with water. The task of recovering the cars was a hopeless one and they therefore filled over them and the cars remain in the muddy depths to this day.

"The mountain division of the Western Railroad beginning at Chester Factories and ending with the Washington summit, cost over \$1,000,000. One mile of this road between the 128th and 129th mile post cost \$219,929.87 The Washington summit, ½ mile in length, cost \$134,000."

In 1840, a large part of the grading of the 63 miles in the state west of the Connecticut river, was completed and the rails laid upon 35 miles. The running of cars from Springfield to Chester Factories was begun on the 24th of May 1841, and from there to Washington summit on the 13th of September following. The first train of cars from Springfield to Albany was run in late December.

"In the space of a trifle over nine years from the time when the soil was first broken for the purpose of building a railroad in New England, this important line, two hundred miles in length, and overcoming in its course a mountain summit over fourteen hundred feet above the sea, was completed. Truly it may be said to be a monument of high and imperishable honor to its bold projectors."

The road was first built for a single track. The double track was laid to Washington from Albany just before the Civil War in 1861.

The railroad was unable to secure the proper help to complete the work until after the close of the war in the spring of 1866, when Wm. Fowler and Mr. Holden were engaged to widen the ledges for the second track. The track over the Washington summit was first built with sharp curves at both entrances. When the double track was laid these curves were straightened.

In the early days of the single track road, probably the first fatal accident to occur was the one in which the fireman, Augustus Granger, was killed. It was then the custom, as at the present time, "to help up the grade" the different trains from Chester. P. Bronson was engineer of the "Richmond," and Augustus Granger was fireman. They were helping up the afternoon express from Chester Factory to Washington. The regular freight train was on the side track at Becket. Its engine, the "Rhode Island," was run by John Pinkerton, and the fireman was John M. Benson. George Pomeroy was conductor and later became head conductor on all the freight trains going west. Sam Nicholson and Sol Wing were brakemen. As the passenger train was leaving Becket, Bronson shouted out to Pinkerton, "Wait for me to come back," to which Pinkerton replied, "I am going to follow your train." After helping the passenger train to Washington they turned the engine about and started for Becket and met the regular freight train a short distance below Washington Summit Ledge. As the engines met head on the shock was terrific. Augustus Granger was inside the old fashioned guard rail on front of the engine oiling up the cylinders and was unconscious of the danger when the crash came. He was instantly killed. John M. Benson with the Sibley boys went to Washington depot and took a hand car from there to Hinsdale, as there was no telegraphing in those days. They found an engine waiting there and went to Pittsfield and procured a wrecking train which returned to the scene of the accident. It was eleven o'clock at night before the track was clear. The railroad officials considered the trainmen of the "Richmond" entirely at fault and they were discharged. But P. Bronson, the engineer, had

no trouble in securing a position on the Housatonic Road and remained in their service until the infirmities of age caused him to give up his position. He died a few years ago in Bridgeport, Conn. at a ripe old age.

Another serious accident in those early days occurred at what is called "Stonehouse Crossing," west of Washington, on the way to Pittsfield. The broken axle of a passenger train caused one of the cars to be derailed in the accident and three persons were killed. Two of them were a brother and sister, young people, who were taking their first ride on the cars.

"The time spent in passing over the road from Boston to Albany was ten hours and three-quarters, including a stop in Springfield of three-quarters of an hour. Two trains went over the whole road daily, Sunday excepted. One started in the morning, another in the afternoon, the latter stopping at Springfield over night." (Think of a train stopping over night, nowadays, rather than proceeding on its way!) Two passenger trains for many years stopped five minutes at Chester Factories, for refreshment. The train men usually took their lunches there. This arrangement did much for the building up of Chester Factories and "White's Refreshment Room" was a popular and favorite place on the road.

The building of this railroad here, as elsewhere, created a turning point between the old and the 'new.' The following article quoted from the Springfield Union, dated 1907, shows the new life which the advent of the railroad brought into the town. —

"Located at the highest point on the Boston and Albany, with the railroad sloping, like a house roof, in either direction, at the rate of something like 80 feet to the mile, Washington was of some consequence in those days, in the reckoning of the Boston and Albany. Almost every train had to be helped up the grade and that meant activity around the station. Back of the station was a large brick engine house, with always several engines on duty, ready to respond to hurried calls for help up the mountain. In front of it was a huge turntable, for all engines those days of slow going Bos-



ton and Albany management, when starting out on a trip, went right end first, never backward. Scattered all around the station were the comfortable homes of the railroad men, scores of them, who found Washington the convenient point for living. Near by was the village store, and post office, quite a pretentious affair in those days, for the population was of considerable size and amply sustained the village store. There was scarcely a more lively railroad village anywhere, on the line than Washington 25 and 30 years ago."

The following facts about the road are of

interest:

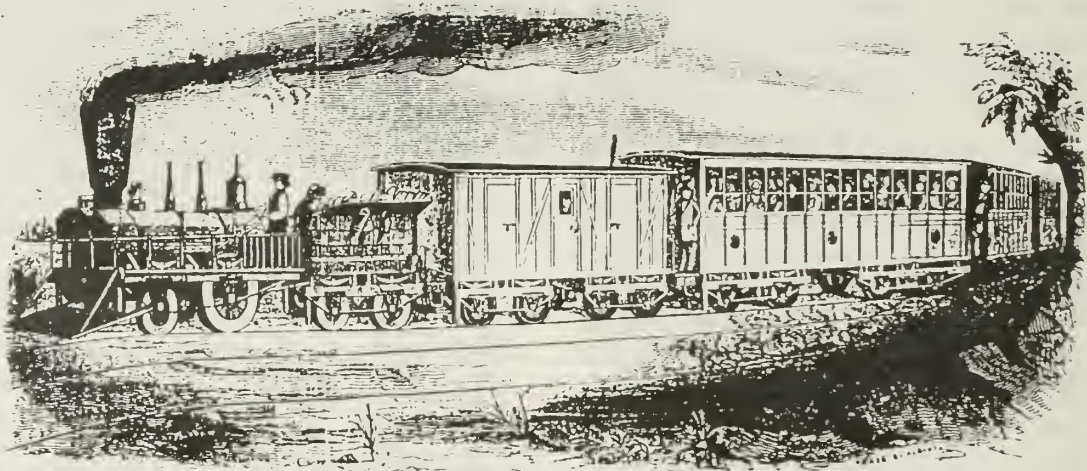
Regular trains between Worcester and Boston and Springfield commenced Oct. 1st, 1839; and freight trains Oct. 23rd. Road opened to Chester May 24th, 1841; to Washington Summit Sept. 17th and Oct. 4th the whole line from Worcester to New York line.

From Worcester to east abutment of Conn. river bridge is 54 miles and 568 feet. Total from Boston to Albany 200 miles and 883 feet.

Railroad opened to New Haven in 1844.

## EXPRESS TRAIN ON WESTERN RAILROAD

(From a Daguerreotype, made in 1842, under the direction of Charles Van Benthuysen.)



AFTERNOON TRAIN BETWEEN ALBANY AND SPRINGFIELD.

STILLMAN WITT, Superintendent at Albany.

THOMAS W. ALLEN, Master Mechanic.

D. S. WOOD, Engineer.

JOHN B. ADAMS, Conductor.

HORACE H. BABCOCK, Ticket Agent.

An early railroad advertisement



# Middlefield's Extraneous Population

By Grace Barr Wheeler

During the past dozen years or so while doing research for a family history, I have found census records to be a great source of information. While one must always prove this information before taking it as the absolute truth, it can be very helpful. Many times the person giving the information tells only what he has heard passed on from someone else, or what he believes to be the true facts. For instance, how many men then or now could tell the census taker the age and birth dates of their wives and children?

Often the person taking the census was far more interested in getting the job done than getting accurate information. Most were poor spellers and their penmanship was careless and hard to read. Still taking all this into account, a wealth of knowledge can be found in these records. I found this to be true of Alpheus Langley's 1840 census of Middlefield.

According to Edward J. O'Day's article, "Constructing the Western Railroad, the Irish Dimension," Alpheus Langley, census taker in 1840 for the Hampshire County district which included Middlefield, was meticulous in recording that community's "R.R. Camp," labeling it with his own colorful description, "Extraneous Population."

The thing which first drew my attention to this particular census was that in 1840 the population of Middlefield more than doubled. In 1830 Middlefield had 702 people living in town, but by 1840 the number had jumped to 1717. The actual number of Middlefield residents was only 686, the rest being railroad workers and their families.

Such names as Murphey, Monahan, Conners, O'Conners, Sweeney, McCartney, O'Brien, Donahoe, Doraughy, and Mahoney

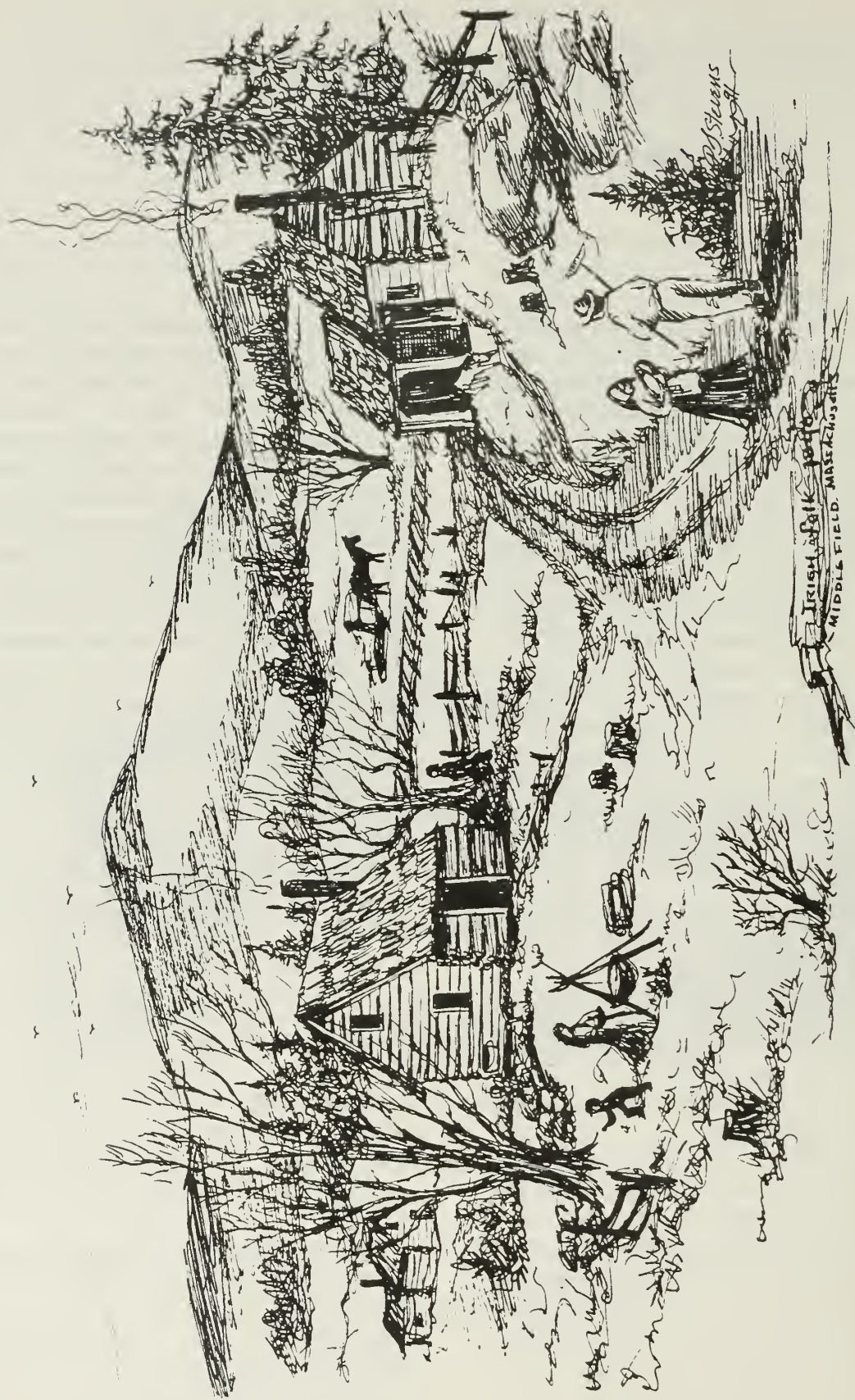
just to mention a few make it very clear that about 98 percent of the workers were of Irish ancestry. Most all the older and many of the younger had been born in the "old country."

The average age of the workers appears to have been between twenty and fifty years old. The highest age group was from twenty to thirty years old. Only four people appear to be in the fifty to sixty age group. There were two widows living at the camp. One was young with five children all under the age of ten. I can only assume that her husband was killed or died while working on the road.

It is very hard to get an exact listing of all the names and ages of these people, the reason being that only the heads of the households are listed by name, and many of them had other men living with them. Such was the case of Timothy Quinley who had twenty-one living in his house. One hundred thirty-seven children were under the age of 5, eight-six under 10, and many between the ages of 10 and 15 years old.

According to *The Middlefield History* by Smith, the fact that there were so many children of school age prompted Deacon Alexander Ingham to secure support of the town to open two schools. One was at the foot of Mt. Gobble, and the other a short distance from the arched bridge. It seems that this is the area where the largest colonies of workers settled.

Only in one's widest imagination could anyone envision the hardships and heartaches these people had to endure living in large groups of one- or two-room shanties with no running water or modern facilities. These people were thousands of miles from their native land. All were strong Irish Catholics, with the nearest church being miles



Irish folk photo  
MIDDLE FIELD, MACKINAC IS.



away. It is said that every two or three weeks a priest from Springfield would make a trip along the line giving communion, performing marriages, baptizing babies, and blessing the ground where the dead had been buried. There are many of these hard-working people buried along the railroad lines. The nearest Catholic cemetery was in Westfield.

How fortunate we are that this population explosion occurred at the time a census was taken and not a year earlier or a year later. Then we would have lost all this valuable information, and people today would have no way of knowing the impact the Irish had on the building of the railroad, another group

of people that helped to make America what it is today, with blood, sweat, and I'm sure a lot of tears.

**References:** *"Historical Journal of Massachusetts," Westfield State College, January 1983.*

*"Constructing the Western Railroad: the Irish Dimension," Edward J. O'Day.*

*The History of Middlefield, Massachusetts, by Edward Church Smith and Philip Mack Smith, printed 1924, Second printing 1988.*

*"1840 Census of Middlefield, Massachusetts, Hampshire County," by Alpheus Langley.*



# How Blandford Viewed The Railroad

*by Sumner Gilbert Wood*

*(The following excerpts are from the book The Taverns and Turnpikes of Blandford, 1733-1833, by Sumner Wood, which was published in 1908.)*

At last came the railroad. No landlord, stage driver or sage had vision of the fateful meaning of steam travel for the ancient town of the hills, or for society, whether of city or country. "Come, boys, the railroad is going through: let's go to work and raise potatoes." So said a father of dissipated habits and impoverished home to his strapping sons. He thereupon promised them if they would work with him he would stop drinking, and they would soon be rich. He was as good as his word, as they cleared \$1,000 a year from the potatoes sold to the workmen along the line of the railroad.

But when at last the railroad came, then began the grassing over of the ways and the settling down to a new regime. Not all at once, to be sure, but with the resistless movement of the decades. It spelled "West" to many a lad and lass and many a hitherto established family whom the prairie schooner had failed to attract. It also spelled "City" whether West or East, until now the hilltop is once more, for a brief annual season at least, the refuge of throngs wearied and distraught by the feverish stress of urban life.

The people of Blandford generally believed in the railroad, as a favorable resolution passed in town meeting bears witness. But the favoring sentiment was not unanimous. Down at Chester Factories the road was building, and the enterprise proceeded not without the onlooking of many curious visitors, among them the lad of the old Beard

tavern, who used to have his daily ride on the stage. When he returned home again, he found an intelligent old gentleman at his father's house, who listened attentively to the young man's description of that he had seen, to all of which the old gentleman replied, "Well, my boy, the building of that railroad is a visionary idea; if they ever get it done, it will make a beautiful thoroughfare from Boston to Albany, but you will never see the day when vehicles will be drawn by any other power than horses or cattle." Today the submarine and the flying machine are less of a novelty than the railroad was to our forbears.

When at last the road invited the patronage of the countryside, this same young man of the old tavern was among the first to try its merits. This is his story: "The cars were like the old stagecoach, with doors on both sides, and three seats in each car, each seat accommodating three persons. The conductor did not enter the car to collect tickets, but came on a rod of iron that ran the length of the car below the door; holding on to another rod above, he let down the window in the door to take up the tickets. The wheels of the cars ran on timbers laid lengthwise of the railroad. On these were spiked bars of iron. Twice the train was stopped, and on looking out of the car the conductor and trainmen were to be seen ahead of the train, spiking down what they called snakeheads. The train ran about fifteen miles an hour.



# The Keystone Bridges — A Tribute to Those Who Built Them

By Denise King

The massive stones form an arch nearly 60 feet above the river. Underneath the huge bridge all is still — moss clings to the granite slabs and an ethereal silence prevails as the cool water flows by. Through the stillness one can almost hear echoes of sledge hammers and pick axes used by the laborers who built this bridge 150 years ago.

In 1838, nearly 1000 immigrants from Italy, Ireland, and Russia began the construction of the first stone railroad bridges in the United States. Under the direction of George Whistler (father of the painter James Whistler), they erected a number of keystone bridges in Chester and Middlefield along the westward route from Worcester.

Overland railroad transportation had been established between Boston and Worcester as early as 1833. Agents of the Western Railroad Company decided to extend the line through Chester to "Albany despite many deep gorges in the Berkshire Mountains."

The team who surveyed the area near Middlefield reported that "the river is exceedingly crooked, the mountain shut in on both sides, leaving scarcely room for a road... The rocky points thrust themselves quite down to the stream and no alternative is left except to resort to very objectionable curvature."

To keep the tracks as straight as possible, Whistler decided to build stone bridges that would span the river. They came to be known as "Whistler's masterpiece."

The laborers lived in crude hillside shanties built from bits and pieces left over from the construction project. Lumber for framing and whitewash used to brighten the interiors of these shanties were remnants from bridge construction. Cedar shakes used for roofing

were trimmed from railroad ties.

According to census reports at that time, most of the laborers were married. The families who lived in the crude one room shacks increased the population of Middlefield from 720 in 1830 to 1717 in 1840.

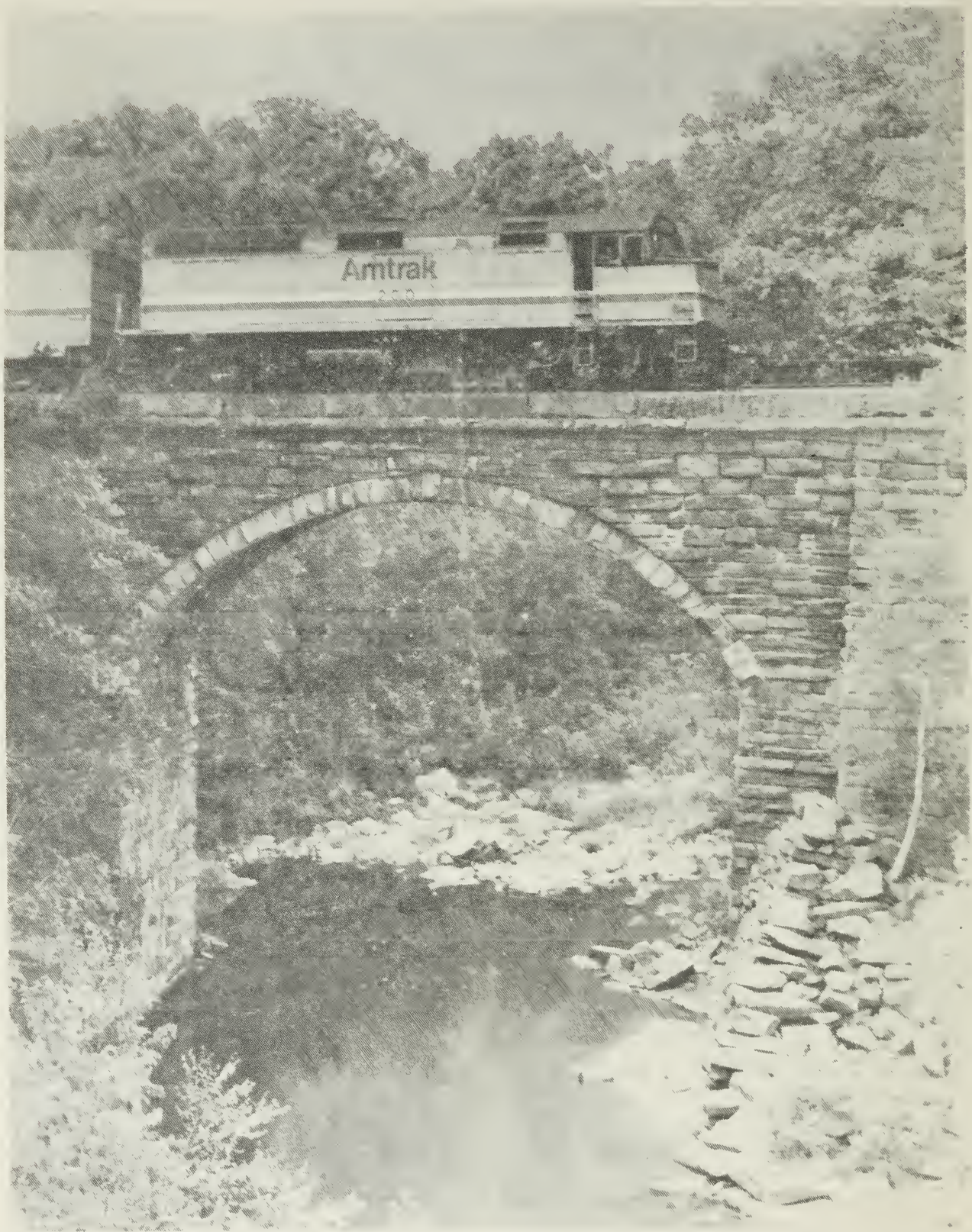
These people were considered foreign transients in Middlefield, and because of this, they were not welcomed by the natives of the town. The immigrants were dependent on their contractor employer to provide for their needs: codfish, smoked pork and beef, cheese, flour, and other necessities were delivered to the camp from Springfield. Clauses in railroad contracts forbade liquor, even in private dwellings.

In spite of the poor living conditions and the inhospitable atmosphere, the immigrants worked for less than a dollar a day, contending with heat and bugs in summer and ice and cold in winter to build the first keystone bridges in the United States. They built them so solidly that four are still standing.

According to James O. Murray in an early issue of *Stone Walls*, "Life for the track crew was dirty, hard, and dangerous. This was years before the advent of steam drills or nitroglycerin. All they had was black powder, a primitive, dangerous substance. The rest of the work was done with nine-pound hammers, picks, and shovels."

Nick Nickerson, a former employee of the railroad and a resident of Middlefield, explained how the bridges were built. Each stone had to be cut precisely at an angle. No two were the same, because they had to fit snugly together. After each stone was cut it was marked according to where it would be placed. Little mortar was used.





**An imaginary trip, although Amtrak and Conrail trains still cross two of the old stone arched bridges. (Photo by Doug Moore)**



As the arch makes a half circle, pressure from the banks holds the center stone in place. "If the stones did not fit together exactly," said Nickerson, "the entire bridge would collapse."

Each stone weighed more than 500 pounds, and was hoisted into place by a steam driven derrick or a manually operated winch. Wooden stanchions supported the spans as they were being constructed, to keep the stones from falling until the keystone was dropped into place.

Once the bridges were completed, most of the immigrants left the area to either continue work on the railroad or to find jobs in factories in larger towns. Very few remained in Middlefield, and of those that stayed, little is known.

What does remain is a route on which travelers can experience the splendor of the Berkshires. An early article describes what

passengers saw along the route in 1847. "Leaving this station (Chester Factories) we pass along through a narrow meadow for a mile-and-a-half, and at 127½ miles, through a deep rock cutting, and immediately over a stone arched bridge, 60 above the river, we enter the mountain section.

No language that we are master of could give the traveler any proper description of the wilderness, the grandeur, of the obstacles surmounted in the construction of the portions of the route."

In these days of steel and concrete bridge construction — when spans corrode and collapse on highways — the enduring structural strength of stone-arch construction is a stark contrast. Today, these bridges, a tribute to the men who built them, are listed in the National Register of Historic Places and can be seen in Chester and Middlefield along the western branch of the Westfield River.

## Costs

At the time it was built, the Western Railroad was the longest railroad constructed by a single corporation in the United States. It also was the most expensive, costing over five million dollars to construct the route from Worcester to the state line. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts had to finance much of this amount.

The Mountain Division of 13.89 miles cost \$980,000 with a single mile costing \$219,929.87. The summit section at Washington with its deep cut cost \$214,311.39 for 1.8 miles of construction. These figures were much higher than had been estimated. George Bliss, the Agent and later President of the Western Railroad, explained the reasons. "Such was the nature of the work in the gorge of the mountains, that it was utterly impossible to make a reliable estimate beforehand. For instance, no doubt was entertained that the ledges on the line would furnish materials for the masonry. But the stone was condemned as unfit; and material was procured from a distance, over roads almost impassible."

George Bliss, *Historical Memoirs of the Western Railroad*, Springfield, 1863, p. 61

## George W. Whistler

George Washington Whistler was the chief engineer of the Western Railroad during two crucial years of construction and early operation, 1840 to 1842. Born in 1800, he graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and was a Major in the Corps of Engineers. Early in his career, he was sent by the Army to assist the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in laying its roadway and later went to England to study railroads there.

In 1834 Major Whistler became superintendent of the Lock & Canal Company in Lowell, Massachusetts, which built some of the first locomotives. Then he helped build and later managed the New York, Providence, & Boston Railroad. From there he became chief engineer of the Western Railroad. His contribution to this railroad was such that it sometimes has been called "Whistler's Railroad." He resigned in 1842 to go to Russia to build the railroad between St. Petersburg (Leningrad) and Moscow for the Czar. He died there of cholera in 1849. One of his sons, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, was the famous artist who painted "Whistler's Mother."

References: Henry B. Comstock, *The Iron Horse and America's Steam Locomotives*. 1971, 68-70.

Charles E. Fisher, *The Western Railroad*, Bulletin No. 69, The Railroad & Locomotive Historical Society, 87-88.



Natalie Birrell

## Western Railroad Winter Arrangement

Commencing Wednesday, Dec. 1, 1847,  
PASSENGER TRAINS run daily, Sundays  
excepted, leaving as follows—  
Boston, 7 and 8 A.M., and 4 P.M.  
Worcester, 8 ½ and 10 A.M. and 6 P.M.  
Albany, 7 ¼ A.M. 2 ¾ P.M.;

Springfield, 8 ½ A.M. and 1 ¼ P.M.; for  
Albany;

Springfield, 8 ¾ A.M.; 1 ¼ and 3 P.M., [or  
on arrival of the train from New York] for  
Worcester and Boston.



# On Crossing Mountains

*By David Pierce*

To the earliest railroad builders from Boston the range of mountains known variously as the Taconic Mountains, Hoosac Range, or Berkshire Hills between Massachusetts and New York represented a formidable obstacle. Much has been written about the Hoosac Tunnel as a means of crossing this barrier. Plagued with disaster, and costing the lives of over 196 men, it seems to be a case of the squeaky wheel getting the grease.

The excavation of over two million tons of rock with a deviation of less than 1/16 inch per 1,000 ft. of advance was an incredible feat in the context of the age to be sure, yet it caused a political and financial upheaval in the state of Massachusetts more dire than the troubles of today. In fact, 10 years after the tunnel was completed the state was spending half its yearly revenues to pay off the Hoosac debt.

The state finally sold the tunnel for \$5,000, a net loss of around 12 million. While it's easy to get swept up in the fact that the tunnel could be completed at all, it should be pointed out that having been completed is not necessarily synonymous with having been successful. The technical advances attained at the site, such as the development of nitroglycerin, had to do with the business of tunneling and excavation, rather than railroad construction per se. Indeed, by 1876 when the tunnelers emerged, rails spanned the continent. Surely someone must have found a better way of reaching New York State.

That someone was Major George Washington Whistler, the long overlooked "Whistler's father." Maj. Whistler was the chief architect and engineer of the Western Railroad, so named because its terminus of Albany, with access to the Erie Canal, was "the west," at least the civilized west, in 1841 when service began.

This company had crossed the Berkshires

with style and grace in the form of seven stone arch bridges, constructed ahead of schedule and under budget by a railroad which, rather than being bailed out by the state, paid a healthy dividend for the next 100 years.

This railroad, when merged with the Boston & Worcester, created the legendary Boston & Albany, a prosperous line that remains one of the most heavily traveled routes in the Conrail network today.

It was this line that Alva Crocker, wealthy papermill owner, and would-be railroad tycoon, of Fitchburg was trying to emulate when he proposed the tunnel in 1848. He hoped to see the miraculous growth exhibited by Worcester, Springfield, and Pittsfield come to Fitchburg, Greenfield, and North Adams along the northern route of his Fitchburg Railroad (later Boston & Maine).

Sadly, the time involved in digging the tunnel precluded this from happening, as the railroad boom had crossed the country, and none of these cities ever became the economic equal of those to the south. In fact, Mr. Crocker himself did not live long enough to ride through the "Great Bore" as it was known among detractors of the day.

By contrast, Maj. Whistler's arches had no detractors. They were lauded as wonders to be seen and see from as the train wound its way through the beautiful Westfield River Valley.

Maj. Whistler's accomplishments were summed up in the acceptance of his resignation, in which the directors wrote: "Employed in surveying, locating, and constructing a railroad over a section of country, and through mountain passes which seemed to bid defiance to the power of man, his genius and industry have triumphed over all obstacles and have succeeded in surmounting a summit of more than 1,400 ft. without in any case



**RAPID TRANSIT**

SAVE TIME TAKE THE DISTANCE

# DO SACO LINE

## ROUTE

**HOUSAC**

**SHORTEST LINE BETWEEN**

**GENERAL OFFICE**

**250 WASHINGTON ST BOSTON**

**CARRYING THE UNITED STATES**

**MAIL**

**Sam'l Finlay Gen. Agent**



losing the elevation that had previously been obtained."

These glowing terms are quite a contrast to the charges of impropriety and corruption surrounding the tunnel project.

Before we give the impression that the Western Railroad had an easy time of it, it should be pointed out that these bridges represented the epitome of structural engineering of the day. The Western chose to 'climb over' the mountain. Following the west branch of the Westfield River, they attained a "water level" route for the most part, but between Chester and Becket the river became very twisting. The railroad could not turn as sharply, and was forced to bridge it at every change of course.

This called for a total of seven crossings. Each bridge was higher than the last as the grade continued upward. The first in line is a double arched span, and the highest is 90 ft. above the water. These remain among the steepest railroad grades in the United States today.

These arches, and in some cases extensive approaches due to the lack of earth-moving equipment, were constructed entirely of stone, without mortar, in the "keystone" system of design, and were the first such bridges built in America. The stone had to be imported, as local rock removed from the cuts was not satisfactory. The stones were cut to fit with such precision that a knife blade will not slide between them. This portion of the railroad was completed in a little over two years.

Blasting technology, first developed during the tunnel construction, was employed by the B&A in 1912 to make cuts previously impossible, and by making changes in the course of the river itself, some sharp curves were eliminated, and most of the arches bypassed, which now stand as silent sentinels. Two, however, still carry trains, needless to say much heavier than those of 150 years ago, and are holding up very well, thank you.

There were those who, in 1850, called for the tunnel to be abandoned, and from an economic standpoint it is difficult to judge the negative impact on the cities along the route of the interminable amount of time it took to complete. While the Fitchburg Railroad manages to cross the mountains at a 600 foot lower grade, this was not an even trade-off for having to wait 25 years to begin service.

Current owners, Conrail (ex-B&A) and Guilford Industries (ex-B&M), follow the pattern set through history, the southern route being the dominant player with more than twice as many trains daily.

Present day competition between these routes also comes in the form of long distance phone service. Sprint bought space along the Conrail main line for its cable, and MCI's cable route takes it through the tunnel. Another form of contemporary rivalry between the lines is that of historical recognition. In this regard the tunnel is way out in front, currently enjoying a state-funded museum, and much more publicity, most recently a PBS special. The arches, while listed as historic landmarks, wait in silent obscurity.










Perhaps it is significant to note that the tunnel, at a final cost of \$3,250,000 per mile, is one of the few projects which could be built more cheaply today. On the other hand, the arches, at about \$70,000 per mile, a bargain at the time, could not now be duplicated at any price.

To sum up, it is not our aim to detract from the tunnel, rather to put it into perspective with another, less well known solution to the challenge.

If you are among the thousands who make the pilgrimages to Hoosac each year to contemplate the ingenuity of an earlier age, consider heading for Chester instead. There you will experience the quiet elegance of Maj. Whistler's structures, so efficient in delivering the frontier to its next challenge.

Middlefield, Hampshire County

Milepost  
128.21

-  Rock cut
-  Retaining wall
-  Keystone arch bridges
-  Concrete or Girder Deck Bridge
-  1840 route
-  1912 route
-  West Branch, Westfield River  
& Tributaries showing  
flow direction
-  River course changes
-  Photo locations

Note: From Chester boundary west,  
river is the border between  
Becket and Middlefield.  
Not to scale

Chester, Hampden County

Becket, Berkshire County



N

Milepost  
130.46

Map by David Pierce



# Alexander Birnie

A key but unknown person in the construction of the Western Railroad through the Berkshire Hills was Alexander Birnie, a stone mason from Scotland. He came to the United States in 1827 with his father and family. After working in New Jersey constructing masonry for the Morris Canal and a railroad bridge over the Passaic River, he moved to Massachusetts. Here he worked on the Boston & Providence Railroad and the Stonington. Coming to the Western Railroad, Birnie's Company had an exclusive contract for the masonry in the Seventh Division (Chester to the summit in Washington.) This was the

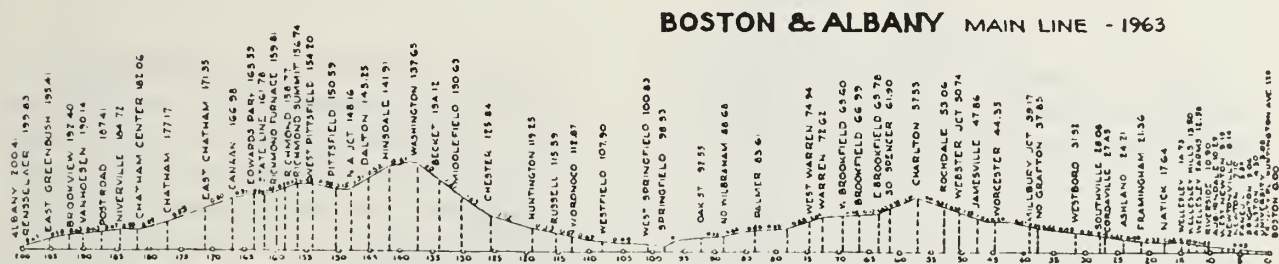
Mountain Division where the stone arched bridges are located and which cost nearly a million dollars to build. Upon the completion of the Western Railroad, Alexander Birnie and his family moved to Hastings, New York. There, he was accidentally killed while blasting rock for a fish pond in 1858.

References: Everts, *History of the Connecticut Valley*, vol.2, p.892.

O'Day, *Constructing the Western Railroad:  
The Irish Dimension,*

*Historic Journal of Mass.*, vol. XI, no. 1, p.16.

# Grades on the B&A — Worcester to Albany



## Important Dates

1833 Charter granted for the organization of the Western Railroad.

Oct. 1, 1839 Railroad open to Springfield

December 1841 Railroad service began between Albany and Boston, using the Hudson and Berkshire Railroad.

Sept. 4, 1867 Formation of the Boston and Albany Railroad with the consolidation of the Boston and Worcester Railroad and the Western Railroad.

1900 The Boston and Albany Railroad was leased to the New York Central Railroad.

1968 Merger of the New York Central and Pennsylvania Railroads into the Penn Central Railroad.

1976 Conrail (Consolidated Rail Corporation) took over operation of the bankrupt railroads in the Northeast including the Boston and Albany, which is now part of the Conrail Albany Division.

# One Hundred and Fifty Years Ago

(Mr. Porter was the editor of the "Westfield Newsletter")

In reporting the excursion over the new railroad from Westfield to Chester, May 21, 1841, Mr. Porter says:

"At half past twelve, the cars, after *taking in* the gentlemen of the press and other professionals in this town, started for Chester Factories, 18 miles from Westfield; the distance being performed in less than an hour. We landed at the depot at that place and then proceeded on foot to the hotel of our excellent host Mr. Stevens where we were regaled with a dinner of the 'tallest kind.' Nothing short of an entire basket of Champagne was 'drank' on the occasion. After spending two or three

*John Lockwood, Westfield and its Historic Influences, Vol. 2, p.310.*

hours at Chester, enjoying ourselves in the happiest possible manner, the company left for this place, highly delighted with our *novel* excursion. In all our railroad travels we never felt more perfectly at home than under the guardian care of Major Whistler, the Chief Engineer. Mr. Adams of the engineer corps, will please accept our thanks for his kindness. The road between Westfield and Chester appears to be one of the best and safest that we ever passed over. It is the last route in the world where we should ever dream of making a railroad. It follows the valley of great river and crosses the stream eight times."

## Train Wreck

*By Betty Brooks*

My father used to tell us the story of his father [Lester Burton Cross — born 1840, died 1935] and a train wreck on the old "Western Railroad."

Grampa Cross was a young man when it happened, working as a brakeman, I believe, for the railroad. He probably resided in Becket at the time. He was on board a train one night which jumped the tracks above the Russell Station ["Peckham's Barn"]. The train wrecked as it came to the bridge over Russell Falls. Grampa Cross was dispatched to warn a train which was following. He ran back to the bridge at Turtle Bend. I believe a man by

the name of Tuttle lived at this location and one of his jobs was to inspect that bridge and guard against fires. At this time the bridges were constructed of wood and the engines, or locomotives, were wood burners, and fires were **not** uncommon. According to the story, the engineer of the following train failed to see the lanterns being frantically waved by the man Grampa Cross roused to help him at Turtle Bend — so good old grampa took aim at the engineer with rocks from the roadbed, got his attention and the train was halted in time to prevent a collision with the wreck down-river!.



Natalie Birrell





Brakemen used to ride on top of the freight cars to apply the brakes by hand on the down grades.

# Problems



**B&A Railroad looking east after washout at Becket, Nov. 4, 1927.**



**A Chester wreck two miles east of railroad station, around 1915.  
(Courtesy of Arthur Wilander)**



# How the Railroad Changed Hinsdale

*By Waddy Pierce*

The whole village of Hinsdale, which had a population of about 1,100 people in the mid-nineteenth century, picked itself up by its bootstraps and moved homes, barns, stores, shops, along with a large church, a mile west down a steep hill to the Housatonic River Valley below. This mass move which occurred a few years before the outbreak of the Civil War was motivated of course by the arrival of the railroad, pushing west toward Albany.

Hinsdale, along with other communities in the central Berkshire area, was virtually locked away from the outside world — the only transportation being by stagecoach and other horse-drawn vehicles. The Housatonic River was never navigable, being little more than a shallow stream in some places.

Just about everything — clothing, food, building materials, toys, and farm implements — were homegrown and/or locally crafted. Springfield to the east and Albany to the west were less than fifty miles away, but limited access through rough terrain put them beyond the reach of most people. Few Hinsdalites ever ventured further away than nearby Pittsfield with its modest commercial advantages.

Now the railroad was coming to unlock the gates of the world. Stylish clothes, new kinds of food and spices, modern farm machinery, and goods for the home and kitchen whetted appetites. Local farmers eyed nearby cities as markets for their vegetables, dairy products, maple sugar, lumber, Christmas trees, peat, and firewood.

One by one, Hinsdale families began moving down 'Mack's Hill' on Maple Street (Route 143) acquiring land on both sides of the railroad property. At the outset church

elders apparently did not take reports of the railroad's arrival as a serious threat to attendance and membership. A historical account published in 1895, commenting on the late 1830s, said "...The men of the church discussed town affairs, including the new railroad which is planned to run from Boston to Albany, and the foolhardy scheme of those who imagined they could cut through Washington Mountain." A few years later, however, the foolhardy scheme had become a reality. The historical account adds: "The railroad was built and 'Water Street' sprang up."

Something had to be done, and the question of moving the church or constructing a new one agitated the parish for eleven years. At one meeting a vote to try and move the fifty foot wide building was approved but it was later rescinded. At another session in the same year it was voted to construct a church near the new center of the town, and half of the money needed was raised through pledges. But this too was later abandoned.

The problem was that the majority of the parishioners had to walk to church. There was no public transportation, and only a few owned horses. The ranks of attendees were heavy with women, elderly residents, babes in arms, and Sunday School children. The church had to be a neighborhood institution in the true sense of the word.

The church was originally constructed near the entrance of the Maple Street cemetery where a huge stone gate now stands. It was dedicated in October 1799. It is a typical white clapboard, all wood New England church with a steeple 110 feet tall and a wrap-around balcony in the sanctuary.

The history book says only, "...In 1857, after

a forensic struggle, the house was taken up bodily and brought more than three quarters of a mile to its present site." Near the intersection of Route 8, it stands within a few hundred yards of the Town Fire Station, Kittredge Elementary School, and the Public Library... a three-minute walk from the railroad.

The move, all of which had to be done with volunteer labor and horse power, involved the excavation of a cellar hole, construction of foundations and then moving the heavy rectangular steeped structure down a sharp incline on a soft gravel surface. Hundreds of trees had to be moved. Sketchy church records from the period indicate that the move itself took two weeks with heavy log rollers and teams of draft horses either pulling or holding back, depending on the terrain. There was at least one mishap on the incline when the movers lost control momentarily and the front of the building tipped off its rollers and jammed into the ground. Some of the heavy underbeams were split and had to be replaced.

On the Sunday that the church was between sites it was temporarily jacked up and opened to parishioners for the usual worship services. The church survived the trauma of those days, and 33 years after the move, in 1890 a chapel/fellowship hall, kitchen, and Sunday School rooms were added to the rear of the sanctuary.

The railroad did open up Hinsdale to commerce, including textile mills which thrived until the depression of the 1930's. Up through World War II several carloads of evergreen boughs and Christmas trees were shipped to the Boston and New York areas every autumn. The boughs were distributed to florists and department stores for Christmas decoration. Dried peat, mined from the old "peat bog" at the rear of the present town garage, was also shipped by rail. For the most part, however, the rail sidings in Hinsdale were used for the importation of commercial feeds for local dairy and poultry farmers, also implements and farm machinery. With the turn of the century, coal replaced wood as the popular home heating fuel, and hopper cars from the northern Pennsylvania coal mines

were seen with increasing regularity.

There were literally miles of siding at the top of the grade known as the "Hinsdale Flats," and oldtimers, including this ancient scribe, recall the depression years when hundreds of old boxcars were mothballed here. What fun it was as a boy to climb the side ladders of these silent wooden ghosts and run along the catwalks on top, leaping from one car to the other, while keeping a wary eye out for any railroad personnel. Except for passing trains and wildlife in the woods along the tracks, the area was deserted.

The passenger trains made a big difference in the quality of life, allowing residents access to such places as Albany and Springfield on a one-day round trip basis on the rare occasions they could find the leisure time. It also brought mail in and out in a matter of days instead of weeks. In fact, all the mail and Railway Express packages went in and out of Hinsdale by rail until after World War II when the trucks took over in the late 1940's.

The number of local trains which stopped at the small communities along the line varied slightly with their schedules over the years, but there were at least five or six of them a day, each with one engine, a mail and baggage car and two coaches, (one smoking and one non-smoking.) The trains were all numbered, with the east-bound ones carrying even numbers and westbound, odd numbers.

The "Hinsdale Flats" had the distinction of being the highest point on the railroad from Boston to Albany. This distinction is even greater today, since Hinsdale is the summit of the entire Lakeshore run all the way to Chicago. It presented a major problem in the old steam-powered days of the B&A, especially for eastbound traffic. Despite careful planing in their make-up, these trains frequently were overloaded and stalled on the steep grade from Pittsfield Junction. For this reason there were two eastbound tracks. Trains following a stalled freight were quickly rerouted around it, eliminating a major tie-up as additional pusher engines were sent to the rescue.

There was a lot of romance about all this for



me as a boy some sixty years ago. On summer nights with the windows open, I could hear the whole drama unfolding as I lay in my bed about a quarter of a mile from the top of the grade. I can still hear the screechy sound of

powerful steel wheels spinning on the rails and going nowhere...like a giant trapped animal. It was a good time in history to have been a boy.



## Ramblings – Night Train

*by William S. Hart*

I recall, when I was small, the sound of far-off trains, and somehow at night it seemed louder yet, calling through the rain. The "whoo-ee" sounds, mixed long and short, could tell the trainmen much, of what was ahead and what was behind and where they were and such. I pictured the fireman shoveling coal into the firebox hole and could sense the sweat on his forehead, wet as exertion took its toll. As I lay in the dark I could imagine the sparks as the fireman fought for steam, and a vision of this iron horse man occasionally appeared in my dreams. The engineer peered, 'neath his pulled down cap, to make certain of the track as the lone beam shone and his face was blown by the spray along the way. The conductor, alone, was happy and content as through the night they sped, for his work slowed down and he could

rest when his passengers were in bed. In their berths they peacefully slept, as across the country they swept, with not a thought for the faithful crew who labored to be there when due. Down at the crossing the warning bells clanged and the guard swung his lantern red. And after a while the train would pass through, its sides a glistening black, as off in the night its eerie sound blew as it continued down the tracks.

And even now, when it rains at night, I think of that lonesome wail and the ghosts of the crew who carried her through as she rode the double rails. The age of steam is now in the past, and to many it means not a thing; but to some, like me, it will always last and be a memory to please.

# The Railroad: Friend Or Foe?

## *The effects of the railroad on a small town.*

by: Pamela G. Donovan-Hall

The small community of Falley's Crossroads was one of five villages within the town of what is now Huntington, Massachusetts. The Boston & Albany Stage Route, via Springfield, passed through the village and later, the Eighth Massachusetts Turnpike. Since this was also one of the routes for freight transportation, taverns and hotels, blacksmith shops, livery stables, and stores opened, accommodating the travelers, teams of horses and wagons. Many of the businessmen at Falley's Crossroads were not only prosperous, but became wealthy. The local farmers also profited since they found a ready market for their produce, dairy products, hay, and grain.

The town's population rose to 1,290 by 1837. Two cotton mills were in operation, manufacturing 225,000 yards of cloth annually, valued at \$24,000.00. Local farmers raised 3,720 sheep per year which provided wool for local mills. There were three tanneries in operation; John J. Cook manufactured window blinds, a \$50,000.00 annual business; the Hannums owned an axe factory on Norwich Hill; Erastus Knight operated a turning shop and saw mill in Knightville; whetstones were produced in great numbers by the Merritt family in Indian Hollow; grist mills and saw mills operated at Norwich Bridge and Littleville. The town, as a whole, continued to flourish — then the railroad came.

This town was the first in Hampshire County to be favored by the railroad. The first train, "Hampshire," arrived at Falley's Crossroads on May 24, 1841. The (early) Industrial Revolution was brought to our doorstep!

Mr. James Williams and his young son, Whitman, of Falley's Crossroads witnessed the coming of the railroad, as it was right next

to their house. The pony engines, weighing a little more than twenty tons, would stop at their house to load up with well water and wood to get up steam for the climb to Chester. Three to four trains a day passed through town making their eighteen-mile trip in one hour.

Even though the village of Falley's Crossroads had retained its name for forty-six years, within five years of the building of the railroad, its name was changed to Chester Village. Perhaps the change made it easier to identify for the new corporation.

Within a few years the railroad brought new businesses into town. The Copelands came from Hartford, Ct. Melvin Copeland manufactured planes and his brother made bedsteads. Bartlett & Williams began making baskets; Greenleaf & Taylor built a papermill and by 1868 one ton of writing paper was manufactured each day; Little & Stanton began a woolen mill and were the first in the country to make Marseilles bedspreads by power loom. Employee Mr. Steiger (ancestor to Steiger stores) arrived here from Germany and had learned the trade in his own country; Hannum Axe Factory moved from the hill to the village. Due to the proximity of the railroad, this village became the town's center.

The effects of the railroad changed the course of history, not just for the village, but for the town as a whole.

The First Congregational Church on Norwich Hill had existed for sixty-four years, but its location was not acceptable to the newcomers in the village. Using their influence, wealth, and power, they organized their own and the Second Congregational Church was founded.

The district or town of Norwich, Mas-



sachusetts had retained its name for eighty-two years. However, when the boundaries of the towns of Chester, Blandford, and Norwich were changed, the folks at Chester Village asked to be annexed to Norwich, which was approved. They did not like the idea of being swallowed up by a little town so they began a crusade to have the name changed. In 1855, after many arguments and much debate, the town was named Huntington.

The Town Hall had been located in Knightville for some twenty years, but this was also unacceptable to the village people. They felt that town meetings should be held in the center of the town. After many threats, arguments, and votes, town meetings were held in the village beginning in 1861. To ensure that future town meetings would not be held elsewhere, some men from the village sneaked up to Knightville and chopped down the corner posts of the old Town Hall.

The town continued to grow, but by 1860 even the railroad proved an insufficient attraction and the population began to decline. During the Civil War the depot was very busy as families and friends would see the boys off to war at the station. Other soldiers on passing trains would find our townspeople lined up by the tracks, waving to them as they passed through. At times these soldiers would receive a gun salute from our citizens.

William Cullen Bryant of Cummington frequently used the railroad for his traveling convenience. One day, while traveling to his home from the station, he stopped at the Pond Brook Bridge in Knightville, where he was inspired to write his poem, "I Cannot Forget." This was in 1864.

The railroad also brought many "undesirables" to town. This group of people were referred to as 'tramps' or 'traveling beggars.' These visitors had to be provided with meals and shelter, at the expense of the townspeople and were sent on their way the next morning. So many of them came here, that by 1869 a lock-up had to be built to accommodate them. Along with their arrival, crimes steadily increased, especially larcenies in the downtown area. Drunkenness, illegal

sales of liquor, and breaking and entering were also on the rise, keeping the local constable busy.

Horses in the village and the railroad did not live in harmony. Quite frequently the horses were spooked by the passing cars or frightened by the train whistle. They would proceed to run with their wagons through the streets, threatening pedestrians or other teams and most often damaging their loads.

By 1873, mail was delivered to the post office — not once, but twice a day. The amount of mail received at the post office in 1873 was 1,584¾ pounds and 536 pounds of mail was sent out. The freight passing through was immense and steadily increasing. Coal-burning engines replaced the wood-burning locomotives. Tickets sold at the station for this road alone totaled over \$600 per month. Passenger trains were long and heavily loaded. Fifty to sixty trains passed through on a daily basis, all having over thirty cars. The rates were three cents a mile for all 20 mile trips and under.

The depot was equipped with fresh running water in 1870, reported to be a long overdue necessity for thirsty travelers. Desks and seats were updated at the station. A new convenience was seen here, as newsboys canvassed the area, making the streets quite lively with the sale of daily papers especially on the arrival of the evening train from Boston.

One passenger refused to pay his fare, abused the conductor and was arrested by the local constable, he was not impressed with the local accommodations of the lock-up, settled the matter, and was quickly on his way out of town.

A group of men were target practicing near the depot and a bullet ricocheted off the ledge into the station. The station agent had moved from that spot just seconds before. The depot continued to be robbed several times, the thieves not finding much of any value, unlike our town constable. He and the State Constables had raided the area looking for illegal liquor and, not having much luck, raided the depot. Here they found a barrel of whiskey and a half barrel of rum.



**Huntington Railroad Station.**

The freight depot was moved to the north side of the tracks, several rods to the east, and an 80 foot addition was built. In the late 1860s, double tracks were laid and in 1875 iron bridges replaced the wooden ones, since the weight of the engines had increased.

Death and injury to the local citizens and the railroad employees occurred often. The five-year-old daughter of David Roach was playing near a pile of railroad ties, when they gave way, mangling her left leg. Frank Avery, head freight conductor, died while coupling cars. He stepped into a hole in the snow and fell under a car which ran over his neck. He was forty years old, leaving a wife and three children. Mrs. Whalen was struck and killed, but it was never determined what really killed her, the train or the state of intoxication. Mrs. Dimock was thrown from the steps of a train and was awarded \$1,100.00 by the railroad for her injuries — an uncommon occurrence. H. Remington of Becket was struck by a passing locomotive and received several broken ribs and crushed toes. In 1874, Bushrod Fisk was driving a pair of horses across the railroad tracks near the depot. The horses

became frightened by a locomotive and plunged into the railroad bridge. One horse was uninjured but the other horse fell 15 feet onto the ice and rocks. James Garland, an employee, was first struck by the horses, then struck by the engine and thrown through the bridge. He escaped serious injury but was badly bruised. A train of thirty cars passed over the bridge in the village as three cars broke through a span of the bridge. Twenty-two head of cattle were killed.

During the 1870's catching rides on passing freight trains became a popular and dangerous pastime. Matthew Doyle, six years old, crushed his head as he tried to jump off a train and was instantly killed. Ten-year-old Elmer Gibson fell under a wheel while trying to board and crushed his right leg, which had to be amputated.

By the late 1870's, people's love affairs with the railroad began to fade. Train schedules were changed by the railroad with little regard to the public's needs. Local people petitioned the railroad to have the express train from Albany and the Lightning Express stop here. The church-going people in several



towns along the railroad united and sent a petition to the President of the Corporation. They were very annoyed, during their church services, by the rattling of cars and the shrill sound of the whistle. They saw no reason why plain men and women should be restrained on that day, while a great corporation could continue to disturb the state from one end to the other. They requested the railroad to discontinue Sunday trains but the Sunday trains continued as usual.

The Main and Russell Street crossings had always been dangerous. Many deaths, injuries, and near misses occurred. On many different occasions, the town requested the railroad to provide safer crossings. These requests were not acted upon. The town continued to pressure the corporation for many years and finally a flagman was assigned. In 1882, gates were installed at the Main Street crossing and four years later, under constant pressure from the town, gates were installed at the Russell Street crossing. It seemed that these gates were out of commission more than they worked. They were always damaged by high winds or demolished by frightened runaway horses. Once damaged, it took the railroad many weeks to fix them. In later years a watchman was also assigned at the crossings.

Railroad accidents increased, mostly caused by derailments. A railroad bridge was demolished in 1885 by a freshet and the piers had to be replaced. The B & A Railroad filed the following report that year: 730 miles of track; 600 miles of this in the state of Massachusetts; total length of steel rail 565 miles; 243 locomotives; 209 passenger cars; 14 parlor cars; 51 baggage mail and express cars; 5,474 freight cars; all other 649. Total number of people killed: two passengers; eight employees; twenty-six others. Total number of people injured: nine passengers; one hundred and six employees; thirty-eight others. Total number of passengers carried: 100,000; total freight carried: 100,000 tons.

When Ulysses S. Grant died in July 1885, all cabooses were draped in black in mourning. During the Blizzard of 1888, the railroad was

completely paralyzed for several days. Mail service increased as the trains brought in mail from the East and West both morning and afternoon.

George Frane of Glasco, N.Y., while walking with two other men by the tracks, was struck and killed. William Munson's body was found near the tracks. After visiting his uncle in Chester he caught a ride on a box car and fell off. He was twenty years old. Michael Colbert from town was struck by a westbound express at the crossing, dislocated one shoulder and received several broken bones and internal injuries. Isaac Vaughn from town was struck by a passenger train but escaped with slight bruises. Ten-year-old James Geven, Jr. mangled his leg while attempting to board a freight train. His leg had to be amputated close to his body and a second operation had to be performed, removing even more of the bone.

Local freight increased as the area people shipped ironwood to Holyoke for making archery bows. Twenty-two carloads of paving stone was sent by Joseph Allard to the horse railway in Springfield. In 1886 a cigar shop opened in town, shipping 50,000 cigars in one week. The next year, over 250,000 cigars were exported. Cider, 7,000 barrels of apples and maple syrup were sent, and 65 tons of coal were delivered in one day. Joseph Avery raised and sold horses to the N.Y. market via the railroad. One trotting gelding sold in N.Y. for \$2,000.00

The railroad's attitude toward the demanding public seemed to be evident when in 1884 the signs on the waiting room doors at the station were changed from "Gentlemen" and "Ladies" to "Men" and "Women." The depot continued to be robbed and raided and the tramps kept coming into town. By 1886 their presence became an epidemic. Within four years (1882-1886), 682 tramps were cared for at the lock-up, at the cost of fifteen cents a head. In one night fifteen to eighteen tramps came. Their care caused a considerable expense, burden, and nuisance to the townspeople.

However, the townspeople believed in



**Main Street crossing.**

helping those who helped themselves. In May of 1886 a 12-year-old Northampton boy arrived at our depot. His tears aroused the sympathy of by-standers as they listened to his dilemma. It seems that the poor boy began to walk home from Springfield but he followed the line of the B & A line instead of the Connecticut River line and ended up here just before the arrival of the 5:43 train. The people at the depot took up a collection and gave him enough money for a train ride home.

One conductor on a local passenger train would have done well if he had had a little compassion for those he served. It seems that four of our residents, Fred P. Stanton, Bert and Anna Winslow, and Belle Collins, were waiting for the train. It arrived on time and a few passengers got off as the four were waiting to board. The signal to start the train was given by the conductor as the four passengers, standing only ten feet away, missed the train. A complaint was lodged but the conductor claimed that the train had been two minutes late and therefore he was in a hurry.

During the 1890's, the railroad was petitioned several times by the town selectmen. They requested that the express train stop

here, as the town had to share the stops with Chester; requested the Modoc train stop here which it did — four years later; and petitioned for better service to the public. The matter of the late evening train from Springfield stopping here caused its usual agitation in town, with the usual indifferent results.

Horses continued to be frightened by the cars and many accidents occurred. The gates continued to be demolished by high winds, train accidents, and runaway teams. Tramps were no longer a problem to the town, as they were fewer and what tramps did arrive were made to work for their meals and accommodations.

Local people were busy shipping their goods out from the freight yard. H.E. Stanton and F.P. Stanton shipped large quantities of cobblestone to Springfield. Also over \$2,000.00 worth of Christmas trees, 5,000 bushels of apples and over 1,000 patent cattle stanchions made by H.E. Stanton were shipped to Hoosic Falls, N.Y.

A new depot was built just east of the old one in 1896. It was made of Milford Granite with Longmeadow stone trim, measured 25'x60' and cost \$8,000.00. New, heavier rails



were laid through town to keep up with the increased weight of the engines.

During this period tardiness of trains was not usually a problem. But it did occur once in March of 1892, causing great anxiety and problems for a half dozen Italians. They had arrived in town on an early freight train before honest people were up and stirring. Throughout the early morning they took rubber boots and shoes and other various items from the piazzas and nearly forty pounds of copper from a near-by mill. While waiting for the late train by the depot, they were discovered. In their haste to escape, their sacks were left behind. The gang was last seen running over the mountain in the direction of Montgomery. They were later arrested in Westfield.

Mr. Stephen Hendrick was brought to court by the railroad in 1895 for unloading stock without authority. In October of that year, Mr. Hendrick was at the station to receive two car loads of cows consigned to Amasa Belden of Chesterfield. The cattle were suffering from long confinement, some were dead, and others were dying. Hendrick and Belden were forbidden by railroad authorities to unload the stock but as an act of mercy, the cattle were unloaded by the two men, who were assisted by some Huntington people. The commissioner took many months to ascertain what had happened, which could have been done quickly, if he had only asked the right people. The case went to court and the jury awarded Mr. Hendrick and Mr. Belden \$258.18 plus interest, the price of the dead cattle. It was proven that the cattle suffered unnecessary delays in transportation and were not properly cared for.

An unusual case occurred in town when a Miss Humphrey had been missing from her home in Blandford for several days. The family was very upset and worried so they offered a reward of \$100.00 to anyone with information regarding her whereabouts. A brakeman on a passing train spotted something in the Westfield River and mentioned it to Mr. Charles Elder at the depot. Mr. Elder, in turn, reported it to Constable Allen Goodboo who

decided to investigate. Both men spent several hours out in the driving rain in the middle of the river and recovered the body of Miss Humphrey. The brakeman claimed and received the full \$100.00

Injuries and deaths of local people and employees continued. Mrs. Electa Miller Gardner of Knightville was struck by a train in Westfield in 1890. She suffered many fractures and was convalescing at home, but died six weeks later at age seventy-seven. She was so loving and charitable, it was said that no one knew her without being made better for it. James Geven, a twenty-year-old popular librarian, was killed in 1897. The conductor on the train which killed him was the conductor on a freight train that had run him over ten years before, causing him to lose a leg. Jason H. Fisk, Jr., age eighteen, was instantly killed. He had passed between two cars to get to the station and jumped directly in front of a passing train.

A number of local people waved to President McKinley as his special train moved slowly past the station in June 1899. He in turn bowed and waved.

The mail services steadily increased and the same year the weight of the mail received at the post office was 1,724 pounds and 1,770 pounds of mail was sent out.

The next ten years proved very profitable for the railroad. The freight business had tripled in the past ten years. Due to the convenience of the automobile, more people were transported to and from the station and the passenger business increased for the railroad. This was especially true for the Worthington trade. The passenger trains had double track cars which were longer and better riding. The Battleship and Mallet type engines, hauling seventy cars and weighing between 60 and 100 tons, began to be used. The safest speed over the existing bridges was posted at 10 m.p.h. The bridges were replaced with three-track stronger ones. The Middlefield flood in 1901 cut the railroad in half and the system could not operate for two days. More and more accidents within the system occurred and derailments were com-

mon. The causes of the derailments were many: breaking of the breakbeam; broken flanges; slipped driver tire; wheels broken. Exploding boilers scalded many employees. When derailments occurred they tied up local traffic for many hours, causing a great inconvenience to the people. A broken wheel caused the accident of the eastbound freight train which tore up ties for nearly one mile and derailed five cars. Many fat western hogs smothered to death before the pile of cars could be untangled. Still greater numbers escaped into the surrounding fields. The railroad officials rewarded our local people \$1.00 per captured hog. Pork had never sold so cheap!

During this period runaway trains were a common sight.

In 1907, an engineer lost control of the train in Washington, Massachusetts, as it descended down the mountain at the rate of one mile a minute. Tracks were hastily cleared as the train sped past both Chester and Huntington stations. The engineer finally gained control of the train in Russell.

Trains were constantly delayed and the schedule of the railroad was reported to be "any old time." Tardiness seemed to be the rule, not the exception. Due to their schedule, there was a severe shortage of coal in town in 1908. When the worker threw the mail bags off as the train passed through, many mail bags became caught under the wheels and were mangled and scattered over  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile. When the railroad was not destroying the mail, it would change the schedule of its anticipated arrival, causing ulcers for the local postmaster.

It was during this period that fires, started by the spark of a passing train, became a concern to the local fire department. A spark caused a fire at the storehouse of the American Writing Paper Co., causing \$20,000.00 damage. A freight car and coal shed were also damaged.

At times between fifty and one hundred and fifty workmen came into town to work on the bridges or rails. They would use old cars or the freight house for their quarters.

Although these men did not cause any problems for the town, they did keep our local doctor busy. Many injuries occurred when the bridges were replaced; four men were hurt when the embankment caved in and one man was killed by the boom.

The local businessmen were so busy at the freight house that they requested a phone be installed, which it was — four months later. In one year 6,000 pounds of Oil of Wintergreen manufactured by E. Dickinson and Co. was shipped; 8,500,000 ferns, used for floral arrangements in N.Y.; 140 carloads of apples which were shipped to Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, & Iowa; 1,000 pounds of stock was shipped to Pittsfield in one day from our local woolen mill for the making of ladies' automobile coats. An eight-ton boiler arrived at the freight yard for delivery at a local sawmill. The only problem was getting it there!

Deer were constantly killed by the trains and the meat was distributed to the bystanders by the game warden. A pair of valuable horses owned by Charles Sheppard of Blandford was injured. The driver, Mr. Culver, was loading lumber on the cars when a westbound freight frightened them. They ran to the railroad bridge and slipped down between the sleepers. The people in the village laid planks out to them, placed ropes under them, and were able to drag them to solid footing. The animals were badly scraped, bruised, and lame.

Employees were injured by their last-second attempts to jump from the hand cars, to avoid the approaching trains. At least four local employees were injured at different times. G.G. Gurbush, trainman, was completely exhausted from four weeks of constant work, night and day. After his shift ended he went to his rooming house in Springfield to sleep and was immediately called into work again. After his duties were complete, he went into the caboose to catch a nap. As he was asleep on the top bunk, the train lurched and threw him on the floor. The train stopped at the Huntington station and the local doctor was summoned. The large cut



on his head required several stitches and he was found by the doctor to be in an extremely weakened state due to overwork and lack of sleep.

Joseph Trudell of Blandford St. was a section hand. He and a fellow worker were inspecting the track when he warned the other worker, who was on the eastbound track, of an approaching train. No sooner had he spoken when he was instantly killed by a westbound train. He left a wife and five children, all under the age of thirteen.

Paul Lipinski, a fifty-three-year-old employee at the Huntington Manufacturing Co., was struck by a train at the crossing. He received a crushed leg, arm, and head injuries. After being treated by the local doctor, he was taken to Mercy Hospital where his leg was amputated. He died two weeks later.

Frank Fox, a Norwich Hill resident, was killed while working for the railroad in Springfield.

Because of a new state law the old dipper at the depot was replaced with a water bubble machine. The pennies in the gum machine at the depot were stolen several times. At the most, \$2.00 was taken. Another robbery occurred, but this time a revolver, wallet, express package, canned goods, and a bottle of liquor were taken. Three men were arrested, found guilty, and sent to the State Prison for five years.

The freight house was broken into one night and twenty-one pairs of shoes were taken, belonging to the Atlas Shoe Co. The men were arrested in West Springfield and the shoes were recovered.

The train station saw its share of unusual visitors. Homing pigeons arrived throughout the spring and fall from Fall River, Mass., a distance of about 100 miles. Each delivery consisted of between 25 and 500 pigeons which arrived by express train in baskets and would be released by the station agent.

In January 1908 a lady asked the Station Agent if she could leave a package inside the depot for a few minutes. Looking at the innocent package wrapped in newspaper, the agent gave his permission and the box was

left on the radiator. Soon a mysterious thumping was heard in the box which grew louder and louder; the station agent became mystified. Soon the lady came back in and the agent asked her if anything living was in the box. "Oh, yes," she said. "It is my pet," as she opened the top of the box to show him. There lay a three-foot alligator. Just then it moved, the box made a dive and landed on the telegraph instrument. Off went the alligator with his jaws snapping. It was a lively chase for a few minutes but finally the lady grabbed it by the tail and hurled it back in the box. The heat of the radiator had awakened it.

The next year Station Agent Charles Hamblin adopted a pet of his own. This one, he thought, will be tame and little trouble, so a little kitten was added to the force at the station. It made its headquarters at the freight house when the depot was closed. Three months later the cat disappeared and Agent Hamblin put out an APB on it. It arrived back home on a train from Chester the next day. It seems that she ventured into a car of freight and was shut in the day before. Luckily the car was bound for Chester and in unloading it, the employees saw her and sent her home on the next train.

One morning Station Agent Lindsey unlocked the depot and found a man curled up by the stove. He had entered the depot during the night by cutting the glass from a window. It seems that he was found hiding with the baggage and was kicked off in Huntington. He apologized for his actions and stressed that he only entered the depot to get warm and had not hurt anything. Agent Lindsey showed him to the door and gently kicked him out.

Among the visitors brought here by the railroad was Francis E. Warren, governor of Wyoming Territory, who visited relatives in town quite frequently. Also, South Worthington's Russell Conwell used the train, often arriving with his Pennsylvania Choir. President William Taft's train slowly came through town in September 1909, as people lined the tracks to see him wave to them.

By the end of 1909, the Huntington people were getting to the point where they were not greatly surprised at anything that occurred within their borders. But, a wheelbarrow being pushed through town on the tracks by a freight engine WAS an unusual sight. A local freight pulled out toward the bridge where workmen were. One man had time to quickly get off the track, leaving the wheelbarrow in the middle of it. The train slowly picked up its handles and began to push it instead of smashing it, and wheeled it along the center of the track for quite a distance.

The 20th Century Limited arrived in Huntington in 1911. Due to the larger engines, carpenters cut off a part of the overhang of the depot roof. The engines came so close that it caused a dangerous situation for the engineers and passing trains. That same year the spring thaw created a large ice jam and several supports and towers under the bridges were carried away. Two weeks later, local residents witnessed an engineering feat while a new bridge was rolled into place in forty-nine seconds. Spectators lined the town bridge and stood on the top of the Heath & Pease block or on other roof tops to get a good look. Later in the year more bridges were rolled into place and the old bridges, used since 1874, were torn down. A gang of one hundred and fifty men was in town to lay three miles of new heavy rails.

One Saturday evening, eight-year-old James O'Hare did not come home at his usual time and his parents became alarmed. Their neighbors helped them search at the riverbanks, highways, and nearby woods and they telephoned area towns. At 4:00 p.m. the next day an Italian laborer from Chester came into town and seeing the panic of the people, informed the parents that the boy had gone to Chester the evening before with the foreman of the gang. The boy was found in Chester.

The railroad gates continued to be demolished by high winds or runaway teams. At one point the chain that operated the gates had frozen because of water in the chain box and became inoperable for a few more days.

Twenty people escaped serious injuries at

the Main Street crossing when they did not see a passenger train leaving the station. One man yelled to them as the train was only a few feet from them. The selectmen again petitioned the railroad requesting a guard at the crossings from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. This was agreed to by all officials. Schedules were changed so that the 4:15 train from Springfield did not stop here at all, not even on Sundays. Many inconveniences existed at the station, as sometimes people had to wait several minutes for the freight trains to pull out before they could get to the depot. The selectmen petitioned for better services and a new railroad station, as accommodations were not as they should be.

Derailments continued to be a common sight, tying up travel for many hours. Two runaway coal cars made a quick trip here from Middlefield, passing the Chester station at 30 m.p.h. Two more mailbags became caught under the wheel of the train and were mangled, much to the distress of our local postmaster.

In March 1912, a wreck in the Hoosac Tunnel caused increased traffic on the B & A Railroad as several more trains were added to its already busy schedule.

The freight yard continued to be busy with the usual exports from the local mills and farmers. H.E. Stanton shipped a huge amount of frost blocks, which were used in all of New England. They were placed between the railroad ties and the rails where frost in the ground had let the ties settle. F.P. Stanton shipped 1,500 60" x 40" platforms to a company in Brooklyn, N.Y. and many carloads of poles were sent to West Newton Telephone Company. Ensign Moore sent 20,000 feet of hemlock to Springfield.

The depot was wired with electric lights. A lamp was also installed near the walk from the depot to the street, which had always been in total darkness. The grounds around the depot were said to be the best kept along the B & A Railroad. Pigeons from Fall River continued to arrive and depart, on the average 1,500 per year. A newsstand of The Union News appeared at the station in 1913. Rob-



beries continued to be a problem, but trucks were stolen instead of the pennies in the gum machine.

The family of Philip Dempsey was surprised at his arrival at the station. He had left town eleven years before and worked as a chauffeur for the U.S. Ambassador to France.

Deaths and injuries continued to occur to local people and employees. In 1913, Edwin Witherell, eighty years old of West Chesterfield, was killed as he walked under the gates when a train was approaching. Bystanders yelled to him but he did not hear them. His body was ground to pieces.

Theodore Broga of Westfield was walking from Huntington to Chester to find work and was struck by a fast-moving local freight train. His head was cut and his back was injured. The train stopped and the crew brought him to Chester where he was transferred to Noble Hospital and later died. He was employed as a farmhand in the vicinity and had moved to the city a few months before. He was forty-two years old and left a wife and several children.

John Dunagen, forty-eight years old, employed as a track walker, was struck and killed by an eastbound 20th Century Limited. He boarded in town but lived in Westfield. He left his wife and several step-children.

John Duff, an eight-year-old boy, was struck and killed instantly near his home. He had crossed the track after a long eastbound passenger train passed but was unable to see the westbound train approach. The boy's mother discovered his lifeless body and as she picked him up in her arms, she noticed that his legs were broken and he had received severe scalp wounds.

An unknown man attempted to steal a ride on a passing train and was killed. One leg and one arm were severed, the other leg was crushed as well as his skull. He did not carry any identification and was described as five feet tall, black hair, and about twenty-two to twenty-five years old. No one claimed the remains, so he was buried at the Norwich Bridge Cemetery in the paupers' lot.

Lyman Twining was killed in Middlefield and Levi Rude was killed in New Haven, where he was an engineer. They were both local men. Garfield Cadwell, thirty years old, was struck by a passing freight train, thrown twenty feet and instantly killed.

In 1912, Chester had five people killed by the trains. One death was that of an unknown man and an autopsy revealed that he had been killed elsewhere and his body placed on the tracks. A full investigation in several towns was made.

Jacques Madru, a weaver at the Huntington Manufacturing Co., left work in 1914 and was killed at the Russell St. Crossing. He waited for the westbound train to go by and did not see the eastbound express train. He was hurled against the ironworks of the gates and received a crushed skull and his right leg was fractured in three places. He was an industrious, hardworking man and an excellent farmer. Mr. Madru had bought a farm on Norwich Hill and went to work at the mill during the winter to pay off his mortgage. He left a wife and five children, ages ten years to fourteen months old.

Another unknown man was killed at the Main Street Crossing. He stepped out of the way of one train and into the path of another. He was about forty years old, 5'5" tall and had a dark complexion. He had no identification on him and no one claimed the body. He was buried at the Norwich Bridge Cemetery in the paupers' lot.

A trainman and sectionhand were injured in different accidents. Another sectionhand, twenty-five years old, who had come here from Russia four years before, was hit by a train at the Main St. crossing and had lain in the snow for a few hours. When he was found, his hands were frozen and he had a fractured skull. He died soon after, leaving a wife and a small child.

On several occasions piles of railroad ties on the side of the tracks were ignited from a spark by a passing train. Grass fires or large forest fires were started. At times these fires threatened homes and barns.

People were not the only victims of injuries

received by the passing trains. Two valuable hounds were struck and killed. The owner of one of the hounds had been offered \$80 for it the week before but had declined the offer. Constable Mack's dog, "Teddy," was also run over. He had been a constant companion of the little folks and was very fond of children. Two deer weighing 150 pounds each were killed by the express train. They had been exhausted from walking in the deep snow. Two horses were killed and the driver escaped injury when the team was hauling a double bobsled loaded with lumber over the crossing, which was bare of snow. The crossing tender persuaded the driver to wait for another team to help him over the tracks, so two other horses were hitched up and as they pulled, something broke. The flagman tried to stop an approaching train, but due to its high rate of speed, it could not stop in time.

A new problem arose for both the railroad and the local people when autos arrived in town. Many close calls occurred, the train usually winning. A large touring car from Connecticut became stuck while going over the crossing. The steering gear had twisted. The people in the village flagged down an approaching train and towed the car themselves, faster than it could have gone by itself.

At the Main St. crossing, an automobile was part-way across when the engine stalled. An approaching train, traveling at a high rate of speed, hit the auto, hurling a mother and her 6-month-old son in the air. Her husband had jumped out only a second before. Miraculously, they all received minor injuries.

An auto delivery wagon was parked on Main Street as the two men went inside to deliver their bundles. While they were gone, the auto started down an incline toward the railroad tracks. The gatekeeper tried to flag down an approaching train, but it could not stop. The auto smashed into the gates; the train smashed into the auto and carried it some distance. Not much was left of it.

Railroad cars were used during the construction of the Lee-Huntington Trolley Line. On June 19, 1913 a temporary track was laid for them from the B & A railroad through

Russell St. to the new trolley line on Blandford Hill Road. The construction of this trolley line was difficult due to the rough terrain. Railroad cars were used to carry dirt, rock, and gravel.

During WWI local soldiers left for war from the depot. Our townspeople again lined the railroad tracks to wave at the soldiers going by on the trains. This time they waved small American flags. The 2nd Massachusetts Regiment was stationed in town, guarding our railroad bridges.

The worst train wreck in the town's history occurred on Tuesday, July 5, 1921 at 4:00 p.m. Fortunately no one was injured and no livestock was aboard the train. The disaster was caused by the breaking of an axle on one of the cars near the center of the train. The train was traveling at 30 m.p.h. and when it reached the railroad crossing at Russell Street, one of the middle cars began to sway from side to side. Before the train was able to stop, seventeen out of thirty-four cars began jumping the track. Twelve cars were demolished as they were ground to kindling wood. For a distance of some 300 yards, the tracks and roadbeds were completely torn up, the rails were twisted, and the ties were chewed up.

The cars comprised a consignment from Morris & Co. of Chicago for shipment to steamers in Boston to be reshipped to points in Europe. The shipment was perishable goods, such as fresh pork, ham, eggs, butter, and lard, packed in ice and shipped in what was known as refrigerator cars. The contents were strewn in all directions and much debris was piled high. Telephone poles and wires were brought down by the force of the impact, which many residents heard. The double tracks were completely blocked, so that other trains were rerouted. A passenger train from Albany was fast following the freight train and was stopped  $\frac{1}{4}$  of a mile behind the wreck, having been signaled by trainmen who ran up the track with red warning flags. The 20th Century Limited from the east was also due to arrive and word was sent to have this train switched to a different route.

Cold storage cars were sent to the scene of





**Railroad wreck, July 5, 1921.**

the wreck and loaded with goods from the wrecked cars. The eastbound track of the railroad was not opened for four days. In the meantime, trains were switched to the westbound track, thus carrying on a single track system.

Railroad detectives and officials arrived in town a few hours after the wreck. A large portion of the food that had been thrown from the cars was stolen. The detectives trailed automobile parties 20 to 30 miles from the wreck to retrieve the goods. They went door-to-door collecting the food and when others heard of their investigation, they voluntarily returned the food they had taken. Residents from neighboring towns also did the same. As this food was reclaimed or returned, it was then immediately destroyed by the authorities. The food that was scattered along the tracks was buried there. The local people became very angry and began to utter protests over the useless destruction of food at a time when so many people were out of work, together with the high cost of these goods. After the investigation was completed, it was found that a large quantity of the food was still missing but officials could not trace the motorists who had helped them-

selves to the goods and immediately disappeared out of town.

Bonfires burned for many days as the officials destroyed the debris and the food along the tracks was buried in shallow ditches. In one day a trainman scared away seventeen dogs as they began to dig up the meat. Area residents had to tolerate this as well as the stench of the spoiled meat, litter of bones in their yards, and the smoke of the burning debris.

Lt. Thomas H. Benton was in charge of the costly and lengthy investigation by the railroad detectives and issued the following statement two weeks after the accident: "In collecting the stolen loot, the officers gave the takers a lesson in regard to respect for the property of others that will long be remembered. The public is to understand that a freight wreck does not afford legitimate plunder. Formerly, a freight wreck was the occasion for a grand scramble for whatever property might be spilled, but times have changed and the railroad is now insistent upon its rights." He ended his statement, "The reason we buried much of the stuff was in order to teach a moral lesson to pilferers."

Mrs. Ellen (Gould) Bates, who still resides

in Huntington, ninety-one years old, remembers the train wreck. She was working as a secretary at Chapin & Gould in Russell, taking the trolley to and from work every day. Her aunt, who was living with the Gould family, telephoned to tell her that the wheel of the railroad car had come off and rolled down Route 20, right in front of their house. When she came home from work, cars were piled up just below the crossing and food was scattered everywhere. There was quite a lot of activity in her house and throughout the town that day. "I remember the railroad officials going door-to-door, retrieving the food that was taken. They had to get it back, something to do with insurance, they claimed," she recently told me.

Mr. George Beals, also of Huntington, age eighty-three, also remembers that day. "The railroad police were in town for quite some time. They would go house to house; I do not remember if they had search warrants or not, but they would intimidate people enough to get the goods back. Their excuse was something to do with insurance. Tons of food was buried; no one got any use out of it."

The freight business declined with the closing of the Chester Paper Mill in 1923. It transferred its operations to Holyoke and a number of people moved out of town to continue their trade at the mills in the Holyoke and Pittsfield areas. By 1925 the town's population was 1,542.

The freight station was the busiest place in town according to Mr. Beals. Everything that was sold in the hardware, feed, and grocery stores came into town on the rails. As a young boy, he would accompany his father to the freight station and if the station agent liked you he would give kids broken crackers or cookies that had been damaged during transport. To this young boy, that was a real treat. He also remembers the system for the mail pick-up. The bundles of out-going mail would be hung on a pole and as the train would go by the worker would hold out an arm and swing the pole into the mail car.

During the Depression, Huntington Textile Co. closed, which caused further decline of

the freight business. This mill was later reopened as the Huntington Manufacturing Co. and boasted "Owned and Operated by Huntington People."

The flood of 1938 caused extensive damage to the Main Street Bridge and this offered an opportunity for the state and federal authorities to plan for a new bridge to be constructed. They designed it so that it would eliminate the dangerous railroad crossing and provide safer passage over the river. The railroad was not affected by this new bridge, while the local people had to vacate their homes and witness their demolition. Many shade trees were felled which sickened many of the town residents. At least eight homes and numerous building were destroyed; some of them were the oldest in town. But, the \$300,000.00 bridge was called by the authorities the "March of Progress" and "Huntington Marches On."

Many residents felt that "in the building of the new bridge, it took Huntington with it." Mr. Beals agrees with this statement. He feels that the village has never been the same. Before, the traffic went directly onto Main Street where there were many stores, but the bridge diverted traffic from them.

In 1941 this bridge was dedicated to Robert Packer Cross, a pilot who was killed at age twenty-five during World War I.

Even though the freight business for the railroad as a whole declined during World War II, the freight increased out of the Huntington station when khaki cloth for the government was produced at the Huntington Manufacturing Co. This order alone kept the mill going for a few years until the end of the war when business began to decline and in 1952 it closed for good. In 1955 shipments of heavy machinery arrived for the building of the new turnpike and the freight business experienced a short revival. After this project was complete, the freight service to the town of Huntington ceased. The freight house was purchased by Texon Corporation from the railroad in 1956 but it was destroyed by fire in 1973. The passenger train ceased its operation in town in 1957. Some people have said



that the railroad station was offered to the town by the railroad for \$1.00 and others have said the asking price was \$500.00 but the town turned down the offer. After many attempts these statements could not be confirmed or denied. Some people think that it would have made a nice library or a lovely restaurant. In any case, the depot was demolished by the railroad in 1959.

During this period the number of people killed or injured became a thing of the past. As it had done a few times before, the repeated blasts from the whistle of a passing train alerted residents of a fire at the Murrayfield School.

Today there are ten freight trains and two passenger trains passing through town daily. The railroad does not pay any taxes to the town. The double track was replaced with a single track in 1988.

Mr. Bob Roche of Westfield worked as a freight conductor on the trains that came here. He worked for the railroad from 1948 until he retired in 1984. As a boy, he was infatuated with trains and choosing this career was a mere act of playing out his dreams. "There was never a day that I hated to go to work. I loved my job—the traveling, excitement, and adventure of it. I felt sorry for those guys that had to be in front of a desk all day. I worked the scenic route. From Russell up was beautiful, especially in the fall. People pay for tours to see the foliage. With me, it went with the job." His run was mostly between West Springfield and Chester; sometimes he went up to North Adams Junction. As a conductor he knew exactly what cargo the train was hauling. He had to write up the bills for every car. He knew where they were shipped from, whom they were shipped to, where they were going and exactly what they contained. Today the computers do all the paper work. In his thirty-seven years as conductor he saw a few wrecks and feels that during his employment the railroad's attitude had changed a lot compared to the 1920's. The concern of the railroad was not so much what they could salvage, but how fast they could push the stuff off the track and out of the way so the

tracks could be cleared for other trains. Time was money to the railroad and time was money to the employees. "Railroad men were the hungriest [for money] men in the world. At first we worked sixteen hours a day; once we were on the job we couldn't go home. Then the Hours of Service Act changed and we could not work more than twelve hours. Working long-hour days was something that every employee did. It was something you just got used to."

Cabooses are thoroughly missed by the public since they have been replaced by a bright light on the last car. JoAnn Blake and family who live on Upper Russell Road next to the railroad tracks said that it took some getting used to seeing the blue cabooses, instead of the usual red color, but now that they are gone she really misses them. In her opinion the railroad makes a good neighbor. The crew always waves when anyone on her street is outside, and after a while the crew looks for them as they pass through. Last Christmas, as she was rushing around her house preparing for the holidays, a train went by and whistled "Jingle Bells."

She and her family enjoy watching the circus trains go by a few times a year, the cars loaded with small heavy equipment, buses, cars, and animals in cages. Having lived here since 1983, they have had only one complaint with the railroad. When Conrail fixed the area at the crossing, sharp trap rock was used which caused a few flat tires on their cars. After complaining to the authorities about it, the area was paved within two days.

When asked about the noise of the trains she replied, "We moved here from Franklin Street in Westfield, which was so noisy from all the traffic. Compared to the city, the country is quiet and as far as the noise of the passing trains, it is something you just get used to."

Fire Chief Peter Webb is extremely concerned. With the railroad hauling large quantities of propane, chlorine, sulfuric acid, and other hazardous material through town, the possibilities of a chemical spill is a reality. If and when this does occur it will be the respon-

sibility of our Fire Department to protect the community, evacuate its people, contain the spill, and/or fight fires.

In the past, there were numerous fires along the railroad tracks from old railroad ties left there by the railroad. A spark from a passing train would ignite them and these fires caused a big nuisance to the local fire department.

"After a while," said Chief Webb, "it was something we just got used to." About 10 years ago Conrail cleaned up along the tracks which has helped, but fires continue to start along the tracks sometimes burning from Russell to Chester. These towns never get reimbursed or even get an acknowledgment from the railroad. "Our department is all volunteer. Our members have to attend so many hours of training per year to remain on the department. This on top of their regular jobs is asking a lot of them. They are all committed individuals and the railroad could at least sponsor some of these classes. It is not only this town either; our neighboring towns have volunteer fire departments, too."

In its 150-year existence, the railroad has had a great impact on the history of our town. It has run businesses out and has brought in others. The train's whistle has alerted us of fires and it has started many of its own. It has taken many soldiers off to war and has brought some of them back home. The railroad changed the name of a small village and it was indirectly responsible for the name change of a whole town. It has brought a few Presidents through town, as well as hundreds of tramps. For businesses and citizens, it allowed them to have many conveniences and it created a thriving town. It was a monopoly to some, employment to others. The trains brought in many famous visitors and killed

some of those who were not. It determined the location of the center of town and in later years destroyed it.

Today, the passing trains are our only reminder that at one time they were a part of us. Nothing else is left. The railroad serves as an annoyance to some and brings nostalgia to others. To most of us it truly is "something you just get used to."

I am still pondering over my initial question, though.

"The Railroad: was it Friend or Foe?"

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# Becket and The Boston & Albany

*By Leonard H. Spencer*

*From A Bicentennial History of Becket, Becket Historical Society, 1964.*

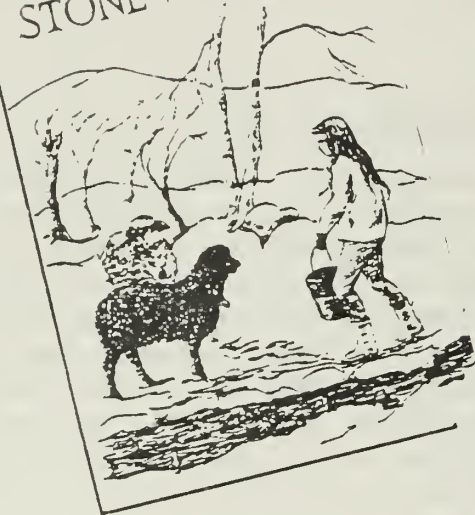
In brilliant summer sunlight the railheads shimmer and dance; dark journal-oil on the down-bound track swelters and gleams. In cracking cold winter an even swathe of snow hides all but a double pair of hard grey lines, glinting cold in the distant, ineffectual sunlight. Trains still grumble and strain upward through the narrow valleys and brushy, forgotten fields; still gain Washington Summit, still in ever more rapid tones of congratulation rumble down into the Housatonic valley. Yet the railroad is not as it was. It is forgotten.

All see it but do not observe it. All are aware of it but do not comprehend it. Becket's crumbling station platform and cellar hole are filled and grown in with poplar shoots; Becket, once a railroad destination, is now only a means by which to reach other places. The Boston and Albany Railroad affected this town and its people more than any other single force. It was intensely important. Now it is unknown and unknowing. It should be known.



Becket Railroad Station. (Courtesy of Arthur Wilander)

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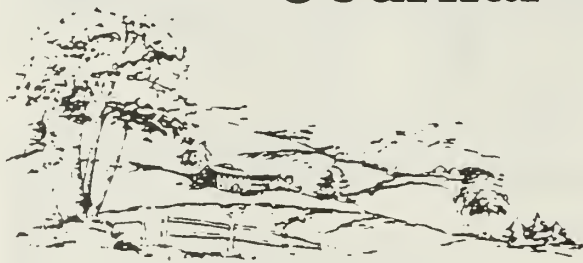
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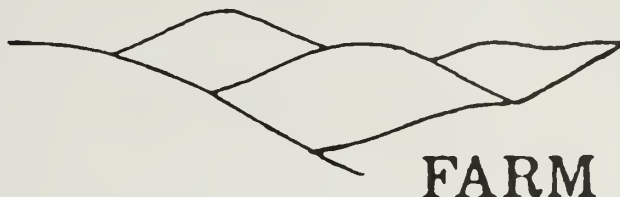


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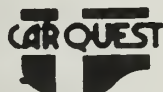
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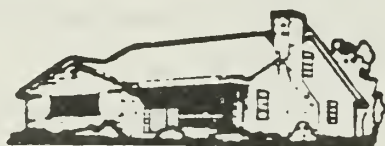
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*"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
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—Robert Frost*

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